

This day shall come

Marwan Barghouti

Marwan Barghouti is a Member of the Palestinian Parliament. As he explains in this open letter to the culminating session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, he has been imprisoned for 11 years since he was abducted in Ramallah.

◀ *On 17 March 2013, his wife, Fadwa, read his letter to hundreds of participants in Brussels and those watching around the world.*

Photo: Renaud Hoyois

Honourable audience, Dear friends,

Let me first of all thank you for your kind invitation. I would have been privileged to address such an audience on such an occasion, but I am certain you will excuse my absence. Palestinian parliamentarians enjoy no immunity when it comes to Israel. Although, I have to say that as a representative of the Palestinian people, being in jail is one more testimony of the deprivation of our people's rights, notably freedom.

Israel's impunity is the biggest challenge to the achievement of genuine, just and lasting peace based on international law. Ensuring accountability would serve the cause of peace and best interests of all the peoples in the region.

Unfortunately, despite systematic and continuous violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, Israel, the occupying power, continues enjoying normal relations around the globe, including as first partner of the European Union in the region, and was never held accountable for any of its actions, including the two deadly attacks against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip or its continuous settlement activity, or the wall considered illegal by the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. But governments' lack of action lead peoples around the globe to express their solidarity with our people by defying and boycotting occupation and oppression.

The Russell Tribunal on Palestine is an instrument for the promotion of human rights, international law and, therefore, peace. It is in this sense a legitimate court, reflecting the will of peoples around the globe for a free and just world.

I would have been honoured to address you

in person today, and in a way your invitation to me while being in prison is one more defiance of this occupation, its laws and decisions. But my words are able to reach you, as a reflection of Palestinian prisoners' determination to make their voice heard, including through their empty stomachs, and your determination to echo this voice and refuse to allow it to be silenced. In 40 years, more than 750,000 Palestinians have gone in and out of Israeli jails. Detention is an instrument of oppression and repression and submission. But we shall not be subdued into slavery. And we remain free women and men, even in their jails.

It is no coincidence the leaders in prison were able to draft a document for Palestinian unity even before the division had occurred and to present a common vision for the way to pursue our struggle. Sometimes, the horizon can appear from within prison cells. The prisoners' document must be implemented to achieve Palestinian unity and freedom.

4,800 Palestinians remain in Israeli occupation jails today. Over 100 of them were arrested prior to the Oslo agreements. They thought when the agreements were signed they would entail their release. Unfortunately, they have been waiting for 20 years now. Some of them have spent 30 years behind bars. When the prisoners ask 'how come the exchange deal allowed the release of prisoners that two decades of peace process were not able to free?' I wonder what message Israel is sending to our people.

When they ask 'how come Israel can legalise torture, arrest children and subject them to ill-treatment, deprive prisoners from Gaza of family visits for seven years, and violate the rights of our prisoners, including defence and visits rights, use isolation, and administrative detention, which is in reality arbitrary detention?; how come it was able a few years ago to besiege our President and our leader, the symbol of our national struggle, Yasser Arafat?'; I wonder what message the world is sending to our people.

When the prisoners launched their hunger strikes, they were expressing their hunger for freedom and dignity. Today, some of them risk imminent death, as the only voice they have to be heard is their empty stomach, and the only weapon they have is their own life. Ensuring their freedom is the way to save their lives.

So when asked why the prisoners' issue should be a priority, please say because it symbolises more than any other issue two conflicting rationales. The Israeli one, which pleads that security is best served by occupation, oppression and imprisonment. And our rationale, that freedom is the only way to peace and the best guarantee for security. The prisoners' issue also demonstrates this is not a traditional territorial conflict between two entities, it is about more than six decades of negation of our people's rights. Justice,

freedom and dignity of our people cannot be left to be decided by the occupying power. It is our responsibility to defend these rights, and the principled support of peoples throughout the globe makes us certain we will not be vanquished.

This conflict is about the systematic and permanent breach of our rights as nation and as individuals. In this sense, our struggle is the prolongation of the fights against discrimination in the United States, of the Indian peaceful march for freedom, of the fights for independence of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and, naturally, of the heroic fight against apartheid. Israel's actions towards Palestinians have combined occupation, discrimination and apartheid. We are therefore asking the world to stand up for justice and not to render aid and assistance to these violations. We are asking the world to help us end this oppression and to preserve the values of freedom, equality and justice, and to oppose the falsification of history.

Your tribunal has highlighted not only Israeli violations but also, and maybe most importantly, the responsibilities of the international community as regards the continuation of these violations until this day.

We are faced with a settlement enterprise which is jeopardising the future of this region. These colonial policies, through settlements, the wall, the checkpoints, house demolitions, arrests and incursions, killings, and attacks against holy sites are being pursued with no major reaction to stop them. So, when the Palestinian people rise to protect their rights, their land, their future, do not be surprised. Your support allows us to ensure we are able to conduct our struggle in compliance with the values we are aiming to protect.

I was abducted from Ramallah 11 years ago, and imprisoned since, submitted to 100 days of interrogation and ill treatment, as well as 1,000 days of isolation. Throughout my life, I spent 18 years in prison, seven in forced exile after my deportation; I have missed my four children's births, their graduations, my daughter's wedding, my mother and my brother's funerals. I met my own son again during my incarceration when he spent two months in my own cell during his four years of imprisonment. Unfortunately, many Palestinians have known a similar fate.

Being the first Parliamentarian arrested, I refused to defend myself in front of the occupation courts so as not to create a dangerous precedent, and will never accept that a representative of the Palestinian people would stand trial in front of the Israeli occupation courts. I was condemned to five life sentences and 40 years because Israel wanted to condemn the *Intifada*, the Palestinian people's struggle and its legitimacy.

But Israel did not stop there. It arrested, at one point, half the Parliamentarians in the West Bank (one-third of the Palestinian Legislative

Council), in an unprecedented situation, while Israeli Members of Parliament are welcomed throughout the globe, including those, who through their silence, are complicit in this crime.

All of that did not break my will, and all these Israeli policies will not break our people's will; especially if the peoples around the world continue fighting alongside us for justice, freedom and dignity.

I have seen a generation rise up in the Arab world and beyond, including in your countries, expressing its deep desire to continue fighting for justice, freedom and dignity, and despite all obstacles, this reality has filled me with hope.

This generation has found its own words in the voice of a 90-year-old man, who, after a life of struggle, has decided to rest, but not before conveying to new generations the values and principles that would allow them to find their way to hope. I did not know Stéphane Hessel, but heard so much about him. He accepted, together with his wife Christiane, to welcome in their home my wife, a few months ago. I also received the kind message he addressed to me after the campaign asked him to take part in the high level committee for my freedom and the freedom of Palestinian political prisoners.

Stéphane Hessel adopted a principled position on Palestine, not taking into account balance of power, or pressure; having an interest only in truth and justice. He understood that the struggle for freedom in Palestine was closely interlinked with the struggle for justice worldwide. He understood that on this tiny piece of land, the future of international law, coexistence, and peace was being jeopardized by total impunity. And he did what he asked others to do. He expressed his indignation, and committed himself to change an unjust reality into a just future.

Allow me to seize this opportunity to convey my condolences, but also my admiration, to his family, especially his remarkable wife, Christiane, who is also engaged for justice in Palestine and beyond.

Israel deprived us of our encounter, dear Stéphane, but this occupation was not able to prevent us from creating ties, and I salute the man of the resistance, the diplomat, the writer, and, beyond all, a man who has pursued relentlessly the struggle for justice and freedom. He has decided to associate his name with the most universal of national struggles.

It is in the name of this struggle for justice that you launched your initiative of a popular court. This initiative should be the prelude to governments and international institutions taking their responsibility in holding this occupation accountable, for the best interest of all peoples in the region, including the Israeli people. It is a very important initiative aimed at preserving our faith in international law.

Ending the century-long conflict requires enabling the Palestinian refugees to exercise their right of return to their homes in accordance with UN resolution 194, after they were submitted to one of the biggest operations of forced exile and ethnic cleansing our region has ever witnessed. It requires full withdrawal of Israeli military forces from the territories occupied in 1967 and the departure of settlers, allowing the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination, including through the establishment of a fully independent and sovereign state with East Jerusalem as capital, as well as the liberation of all prisoners from Israeli occupation jails.

Not fulfilling these requirements, and the aggressive policies adopted by the successive Israeli governments, as well as the biased position adopted by the United States, are the reasons behind the failure of the peace process. Peace will only be achieved when Palestinians enjoy their rights, including freedom, return and independence, as other peoples do around the globe. Our people are determined to pursue their struggle and their resistance against occupation, counting on the support of those who seek peace and freedom around the globe.

Following the successful UN bid, Palestine must use the instruments made available to it, political and legal, to defend the inalienable rights of its people. The Russell Tribunal on Palestine is, in this sense, one of the most important initiatives to achieve peace, probably more helpful than many diplomatic or political initiatives we have witnessed these last few years, which refused to deal with the asymmetry of forces and the root causes of the conflict.

At the end of April in Palestine, we are convening an important international meeting entitled 'Freedom and Dignity', and I deeply hope that you will be able to present your work in Palestine, in the presence of the impressive patrons you were able to gather around this initiative. 'Freedom' and 'dignity', two words that have embodied the struggle of so many around the globe, throughout history. Nelson Mandela once said 'But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians'. We believe our struggle remains, more than ever, universal, and connected to the fight for justice throughout the globe. Freedom and dignity shall prevail. And I hope, one day soon, I will be able to welcome you myself in a free Palestine. And no doubt, this day will come. This day shall come.

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